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Genre's Autonomy, *Autonomy's* Genre

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"Genre's Autonomy, *Autonomy's* Genre"

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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.3 (2020)**

Special Issue: **A Symposium on Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*. Edited by Mathias Nilges.**

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Tim LANZENDÖRFER

Genre's Autonomy, *Autonomy's* Genre

The question of genre fiction holds a surprisingly central place in Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*. It has also been a key issue for me in my research—in fact, I have tried various versions of Brown's argument about the way genre fiction—"commercial genre," in the formulation Brown chooses before his longest explanation of the argument—"opens up a zone of autonomy within the heteronomous space of cultural commodities" (25). I took the argument from an earlier sketch ("Close Reading"), which however has survived unchanged into the book version; and have repeatedly tried to make it do the work I needed (see "Introduction," *Books*, and Lanzendörfer and Schimmelpfennig)—in different ways, indicating the way that I have struggled with the argument's workings, and its validity. That I have stuck with it—and been stuck with it—is down to two things that I find incessantly fascinating: first, Brown's argument about genre fiction appears to recuperate it as potentially as useful—and certainly as meaningful—as ostensibly more socially powerful, so-called literary fiction; in the most radical formulation of this, as Rachel Greenwald Smith has summarized Brown's argument: "Genre reinstates the authority of form and makes meaningful art possible again" (Smith 297).

This is a radical and necessary move, not least because of the often-remarked turn to genre fiction in contemporary writing, but also because of the shifts in the disciplinary outlook at large that a full recuperation of genre-writing—indeed, in Smith's formulation, a turn towards genre as the sole source of meaningful art—would bring. Secondly, however, I find Brown's account of genre as such interesting; or perhaps better, I find it perplexing. Or perhaps even better, I think it is wrong. And so what I want to do in this brief essay is two things. On the one hand, I want to think through what Brown's argument is actually about: is it about "genre" writ large, as a literary category? Is it about genre fiction, a narrower category which is largely historically specific and contingent? Or is it about "generic" motifs, which need not cohere into an argument about genre? And I'll suggest that while Brown's account of genre as it stands seems to be wrong, a better account of genre can be fashioned that still retains the essential features of Brown's.

There is not much of an account of genre in the book in the first place, to be sure. Brown offers this early on:

Why should genre fiction be a zone of autonomy? A commercial genre—already marketable or it would not be a genre—is also governed by rules. The very thing that invalidates genre fiction in relation to modernist autonomy—"formulas," Adorno called them—opens up a zone of autonomy within the heteronomous space of cultural commodities, allowing the commodity character to be addressed as an aspect of the material support. The requirements are rigid enough to pose a problem, which can now be thought of as a formal problem like the problem of the flatness of the canvas or the pull of harmonic resolution. "Subverting the genre" means doing the genre better, just as every modernist painting had to assume the posture of subverting all previous modernisms. Dressing up the genre in fine production values, embellishing it with serious or local content, abandoning it in favor of arty imagery, borrowing its elements for effect, meandering into other genres or into other kinds of narrative—all of these are, on the contrary, mere attractions, excuses for the enjoyment of the genre itself (which needs no excuse), and therefore confirm the product as a commodity like any other. Producing the genre as a problem to which the work represents a solution involves, by contrast, an essentially deductive approach to the given form: the genre appears as a pure given that has to be successfully confronted, such that the support—in this case, the commodity character of the work—can be acknowledged and overcome in the same gesture. (25-26)

I quote this at length because, for all the work that the idea of genre does in the book (it supports, after all, the entirety of the chapter on *The Wire*, and given that Brown understands it as formally similar to the "flatness of the canvas or the pull of harmonic resolution," is also directly tied into the rest of the argument), this is a very short passage indeed. It also opens questions. What *are* the rules that govern a genre, and who establishes them? In how far is any particular genre—"a genre"—"like" harmonic

Brown's account of genre is interesting; or perhaps better, perplexing. Or perhaps even better, wrong. Is Brown's argument about "genre" writ large, as a literary category? Is it about genre fiction, a narrower category which is largely historically specific and contingent? Or is it about "generic" motifs, which need not cohere into an argument about genre? While Brown's account of genre as it stands seems to be wrong, a better account of genre can be fashioned that still retains the essential features of Brown's.

resolution, and not, say, "like" a fugue—which is to say, a named musical "genre" with clear-cut formal requirements? These questions have no answers in Brown beyond, I think, understanding them all as similarly formal problems, a point which rests, however, fully on the assumption that a genre is a formal category in the first place—that any genre is as *formally*, and perhaps *only* formally, limiting as a rectangular, flat, white canvas. I remain unsure of the paralleling that is happening here, which presents a literally material object—a flat canvas—as homologous to what amounts to a historically conditioned psychological structure—the "pull of harmonic resolution"—and to a rather more complex literary sociological category, genre fiction—indeed, in Brown's account, to any particular genre in all the genres of genre fiction.¹

Part of the problem here seems to be that the word "genre" does different work at different times in Brown's brief sketch of his argument. As Jeremy Rosen points out, this is a feature of much engagement with genre: "we use the same word to refer to preexisting frameworks and recognizable formulae, to which all texts and speech acts have recourse, and to a particular subset of the cultural field and marketplace that has been viewed, historically, in pejorative terms" (n.p.). This is a problem for Brown's argument only in so far, I think, as there is actually no distinguishing between the "commercial genres" (25) and everything else, as I think his own argument in Chapter 2 already suggests: there, we might suggest, "experience" functions very much like the stock character of the detective in crime fiction. Jim Collins, in a related argument, has suggested that "bona fide aesthetic experiences" (223) are in fact the major generic point of one subset of contemporary literary fiction, which is, in turn, readable as "a genre in its own right" (McGurl 42), even if we may yet have to shift our sense of what a "genre element" is in order to see the force of this. The first point to note then is that Jacques Derrida's old point that there is no genreless text (65) actually takes on some more force under current market conditions—to turn Brown's formulation around, anything in the market is already a genre, or it would not be marketable. The second problem is that the particular generic formation which Brown seems to be after—"genre fiction"—does not work the way Brown would have it. Jeremy Rosen points out that "recognizing that genres typically have no fixed rules points to the problem with Nicholas Brown's argument that working within the genres of genre fiction 'opens up a zone of autonomy'" (n35). As Rosen points out, there are actually very few rigid requirements in most genres, if we understand these as somehow externally imposed, even if historically contingent, which is to say as anything "like" the flatness of the canvas. If you go to an arts supply store, you will be able to purchase flat canvases—and *flat* canvases only. But there is no choice purveyor of rule books of science-fiction, say, or of a list of necessary features of the police procedural, because these things—rules and checklists—do not in fact exist. Rosen suggests that ultimately, it makes most sense to understand "genre fiction" and "literary fiction" as "not formally constituted ones, but rather [as names for] subsets of the larger literary field and marketplace." He suggests that "while we might expect to find certain formal features in these categories—fast-paced plot, streamlined prose, lots of dialogue, reader expectations routinely met, in genre fiction, or poetic language, depth of psychology, and social acumen in literary fiction—these designations are not primarily formal" (n.p.). Genre, in other words, is *always* "a certain structure within which one can move" (Brown, *Autonomy* 169), not just in the exceptional understanding of *The Wire*, which is what Brown is talking about.

Rosen's point is not easily gainsaid, and much of the validity and usefulness of Brown's argument rests on the idea that genre is formally limiting to such an extent that only in the act of "subverting" it, of "doing the genre better" (26) can the commodity character of any work—its nature as an art-commodity—be overcome. If there is nothing, or at any rate nothing fixed, that it is possible to acknowledge and overcome, then there is no subversion, and thus no autonomy. Brown understands, of course, that in order for the distinction between *embracing* the form of genre fiction and *inverting*

¹ Brown, I think, departs from the observation that the canvas is a historically contingent material precondition, *just like* eight-tone harmonic music and genre fiction; and to an extent, I can't really argue with it. Nonetheless, it strikes me that the materiality of the canvas specifically as a material object, if not as this specific material object, stands in some contrast still to the non-materiality of both harmonic resolution and of genre fiction. If nothing else, it does so historically: generalizing somewhat, no musical work between the general adoption of tonality and the invention of twelve-tone music did without harmonic resolution, and few paintings were painted on anything but a flat, paint-receptive surface (if maybe not solely on canvas). But from the earliest days of "genre" fiction, the so-called "rules" of the genre were broken even as they were being worked out, as it were. (See, for example, the otherwise nonsensical account of the key "rules" of the detective genre in Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), which while trying to develop a theory of why Sherlock Holmes is still read shows the immense breadth of different approaches to the detective genre.). This may be saying little more than that the restrictiveness of the rules between these allegedly similar categories is different, and perhaps to suggest that it is so different as to require us to rethink the categories.

it—to make it meaningful—to be legible (165), readers must first be able to identify the genre of genre fiction; and I think that means for Brown what must “be freely assumed,” be freely accepted, before it can be “legibly subordinated to the logic of the work” are the “rules” of the genre (166). Thus, for example, in Brown’s example of *The Wire*, it may be the “driven police detective” (164) or the 4:3 aspect ratio which are freely assumed by the work; and it is (also) the “genre figure of the driven police detective” which makes *The Wire* able to produce “its own, internal purposiveness” (177)—to become a work of art.

I have little interest in quibbling with Brown’s analysis, except to suggest that the inclusion of a recognizable genre figure (and there is ample ground to accept Brown’s claim that the driven detective is a stock figure) does not, in any meaningful way, make a work genre fiction. Brown never explicitly claims this link, but I think it is an inevitable and important part of his claim: if genres are governed by rules, then these rules must make genres: the “ensemble of genre elements” (159) *is* the genre, whilst their deformation is the immanent possibility of meaning. The difference between *The Bourne Identity* and *The Wire* is not their use of genre elements as such, but the way they are used. “The conventions are the framework that, like the frame in painting, must be neutralized by the work for immanent purposiveness to hold sway;” like it makes no sense to say that any painting is not painted on a canvas anymore after we have established that it is a work of art, it makes no sense to say that any work ceases to be of a genre once it has done that genre one better. And perhaps more importantly than that even, the various genre elements are only really limiting in genre fiction: the driven detective of crime thrillers becomes, in “literary” fiction, simply another character, if one with allusive relations to genre fiction. But all the same, to posit that any particular genre element makes a work a work of genre—and thus rule-bound—seems to be a conundrum, because again: What *are* the rules? Who *sets* the rules? Who determines what is a genre element in the first place?

I think it is possible to solve this problem, and possibly this solution is even the one that Brown intends, though it is never explicitly spelled out. This solution will certainly, however, be in the vein of Brown’s argument. I suggest we need to subsume the question of what genre fiction is—a question which remains important—under Brown’s larger argument for the primacy of the interpretative act. That is to say: I think very little of Brown’s argument for the possibility of finding spaces of autonomy in genre fiction—or indeed, in any fiction, understanding that all fiction in the contemporary moment is a form of generic fiction. But the importance of the claim Brown raises is, as I will conclude, firmly one for genre fiction—changes when we take both the claim to a particular work’s productive subversion of genre conventions and its initial claim to be genre fiction in the first place to be something that is not simply a given, but rather something that is “analytically available” (8). I want to say that Brown’s persuasive account of how “artworks suspend their commodity character” (24) only under observation, namely when you “catch [them] in the act,” and “plausibly ascribe meaning to actual works, an ascription that is itself a claim that the work in question belongs to the institution of art” also names a necessary first step in the argument about genre fiction.

Jeremy Rosen asks, apropos of the notion of genre as a set of rules, or a contract between writer and reader: “But what kind of contract is genre? Readers can’t ask for their money back if expectations aren’t met” (n56); and again, Rosen is correct to question this account of genre. My suggestion is that readers need not ask for their money back, as it were, because they are constitutively part of the genre-making in the first place: if their expectations of any work are not met, than that work is simply not a work of genre fiction, very much irrespective of the genre elements it contains. I do believe this is a change of argument from Brown, who suggests at one point that “the rules that underlie what we can see, as genre conventions, [are] understood because the conventions themselves are already known” (159). But “known,” in this phrasing, seems to do too much heavy lifting. It seems too much to spell something external, something that can be easily referred to: “this is the police procedural.” In this argument, a proposition like “David Simon’s *The Wire* is an autonomous work of art, because it does the police procedural one better” (which I take to be the gist of Brown’s Chapter 4) would actually be a proposition in two parts. The first would be the ascription of genre itself: “*The Wire* is a police procedural.” That is by no means clear cut, anyway, especially when in later seasons, the focus of the show shifts away from the police. To borrow from Brown again: “The only way to make such an ascription compelling is through close interpretative attention” (25). Like the act of interpretation of the work of art, the act of naming a text “genre fiction” thus becomes inescapably intersubjective. It cannot but compare the work to examples already known, of course, but it does not simply check it against known genre conventions: rather, it continuously makes genre conventions in the very act of establishing a work’s “sufficient” adherence to them. Crucially, this does not mean that we do away with the problem of form, or with form as a problem. As Rosen notes, in the set of conditions which contemporaneously identify genre fiction, some version of a formal property remains operative. We are certainly capable of

having, say, zombie fiction without zombies; detective fiction without clues; paintings without paint; or even music without notes. But we will not have a generic ascription without *any* kind of formal relation to the genre ascribed: *The Remains of the Day* is not a zombie novel without zombies because nothing about it would allow this plausible ascription, to a large extent because formally nothing about it would suggest so. Even if the novel's author and publisher, misguidedly, chose to so designate it so (to "name" it for the marketplace), such a categorization would probably be of insufficient force to make anybody read it as zombie fiction. But conversely, whatever may be held by author or publisher, *The Buried Giant* seems to be well capable of plausibly being named "fantasy," very much on the basis of its formal qualities and apart from its placement in the market. In each and every such case, however, we would have to say that there is no adjudicating instance for these generic ascriptions, no way of making the determination stick beyond intersubjective agreement with them: they are developed only in argument. So although I have formulated in the declarative, really what I've just outlined are in fact two argumentative claims about Kazuo Ishiguro's works: only debate will be able to settle the persuasiveness of these claims. But in each case, I think it is undeniable that the respective forms of *The Buried Giant* and *The Remains of the Day* will have to play a role in this debate. In as much as form thus remains constitutively a part of the process of compelling generic ascription, genre also remains a formal problem—but one whose boundaries are less fixed than any set of rules.

If this is the first proposition, the second proposition in "David Simon's *The Wire* is an autonomous work of art, because it does the police procedural one better"—which I think is Brown's—then, should be understood to rest on the first: only if we can plausibly ascribe *The Wire* the name of detective procedural can we then also think through the question of whether *The Wire* exceeds the genre of the police procedural, whether it understands its formal limitations as productive and also makes them productive, and seek to convince others of the validity of our argument. That may seem paradoxical, and perhaps it is: only in the agreement that *The Wire* is a police procedural can we also find room to agree that it subverts the police procedural. Only in agreeing that *Zone One* is a zombie novel can we also find room to agree that it does the zombie novel one better. Perhaps a better way of phrasing this is to suggest that there is a hint of dialectics in here: works of art, we would then say, sublimate the inherent contradictions of a genre under total commodification, in being at once of the market and not.

The final question, then, is what this does for genre fiction as such. If I am right in adapting Brown's argument, I think, the most profound change in literary critical practice must accrue to our work with genre fiction of all kinds. Half of this claim derives from the notion that under contemporary market conditions, all fiction is some kind of genre fiction. For literary fiction, on which we expend most of our critical energy, this means no major change: our interpretative practice is already geared towards it. But for genre fiction, Brown's arguments amount to a sea-change. "A work's assertion of autonomy is the claim that its form is self-legislating. Nothing more" (182), Brown says. But also nothing less. What Brown's argument for genre fiction does is to remove from it any kind of stigma at all: no work, wherever in the marketplace it has been put, can raise a claim to meaning *avant la lecture*, as it were. To quote again from Brown, though this time without the leeway I gave myself before: "The only way to make [an ascription of meaning] compelling is through close interpretive attention" (25). We should take this seriously, I think, in all its implications. Genre fiction is in need of interpretative attention no less, if no more, than ostensibly more (politically, socially, aesthetically) meaningful literary fiction. What changes for literary fiction, then, is that some of it may be plausibly "demoted" to mere art-commodity—this is Brown's intervention in something like the claims about literary fictions genericity that I have offered above from McGurl and Collins. What changes for genre fiction is everything: it becomes exactly as much an object of interpretation, of the plausible ascription of meaning, and in the most forceful of Brown's claims, precisely because its formal problems appear more straightforward and more widely recognized, perhaps more readily readable as formal problems in the first place, may, in fact, take logical pride of place in contemporary literary culture.

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